

CROSSROADS: WHERE MEDICINE AND THE HUMANITIES MEET

A McGill Update of Osler's Bedside Books List

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Dr Murray ends his article by asking medical students to create a contemporary version of Osler's bedside books for medical students. All current medical students at McGill University were therefore invited to suggest written works that they felt every medical student should read to help them in their development as future physicians. Despite the wide diversity in backgrounds of today's medical students, and despite the somewhat unenthusiastic response rate, some interesting trends can be found. (Table 1)

As Dr Murray predicted, students suggested a number of works written by physicians. Perhaps students gravitate toward these books so that they know what lies ahead for them. *House of God* by Samuel Shem, a novel portraying the demanding life of medical residents was nominated by multiple students. Also popular were works in which one or more of the main characters are physicians: suggestions included *Middlemarch* by George Elliot and *The Cider House Rules* by John Irving.

Works that portrayed physicians in a negative way were particularly popular: students seem to want to be reminded how not to act as physicians. The charlatan physician in Moliere's *Le Malade Imaginaire* or the uncompassionate doctors in Margaret Edson's *Wit* serve as cautionary examples.

The search for ethics and a clear moral code is a second theme that emerges from the survey. Although no two works were suggested twice, examples included *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* by Edwin Black and *Doing Right (A Practical Guide to Ethics for Medical Trainees and Physicians)* by Philip C. Hebert. Interestingly, students seemed concerned not only with ethical issues as they relate directly to their work as doctors-in-training, but also as citizens of the world.

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Students nominated a number of works that deal with larger issues of their generation, such as *Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* by Jeffrey Sachs and *The Shock Doctrine* by Naomi Klein.

Psychiatry-related books were a third genre popular among student's suggestions. These proposed books included Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Maxime Chattam's *L'Ame du mal*, both literary-style studies of the psychology of serial killers, and *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho, a novel about a teenager who attempts suicide. Through these books, medical students are possibly hoping to prepare themselves to deal with some of the most difficult patients they will encounter.

Among the rest of the suggested books is a mixture of works, ranging from *1984* to the *Harry Potter series* to National Geographic Magazine.

In short, the results of this informal survey were:

- A work about physicians, whether they are portrayed positively or negatively
- A work about ethics, whether medically-related or not
- A work about psychology
- Any of a wide range of light reading

So how does this list compare to Osler's? He too suggested a book about a physician (*Religio Medici*), a book of morals (*the Bible*), and a number of general interest works (Shakespeare, *Don Quixote*). However, while Osler's list contains many works about philosophy, there were none to be found in the contemporary list. And while students suggested many psychiatry/psychology books, none are found on Osler's list.

This informal survey of McGill medicine students is but one more attempt at updating Osler's bedside library list. Yet this list is unique in that it asked current medical students to suggest books for their peers. Not surprisingly, a wide range of works were suggested, but despite the low number of responses, some works were suggested more than once, and many works within a same general theme were suggested. The list therefore points to a degree of agreement among medical students

as what they ought to be reading beside their medical textbooks. Additionally, this list offers a glimpse into

what students think lies ahead for them, and what they think will help them face those challenges.

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| <i>America</i> by Allan Brandt | <i>Harry Potter series</i> by J.K.Rowling |
| <i>Charles Darwin: The Power of Place</i> by Janet Browne | <i>The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat</i> by Oliver Sachs |
| <i>Running with Scissors</i> by Augusten Burroughs | <i>House of God</i> by Samuel Shem (x3)^ |
| <i>Le Normal et le pathologique</i> by Georges Canguilhem | <i>Say Hello to Black Jack</i> by Sato Shuho |
| <i>In Cold Blood</i> by Truman Capote | <i>Five Weeks in a Balloon</i> by Jules Verne |
| <i>L'Âme du Mal</i> by Maxime Chattam | <i>Vitals Signs</i> by Barbara Wood |
| <i>A Year in the Merde</i> by Stephen Clarke | Alcoholics Anonymous: The Big Book |
| <i>Veronika Decides to Die</i> by Paulo Coelho | Global Health Watch 2: An Alternative World Health Report |
| <i>Next</i> by Michael Crichton | <i>Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet</i> by Jeffrey Sachs |
| <i>The Citadel</i> by A.J. Cronin | National Geographic Magazine |
| <i>The Vanishing Man</i> by Jeffrey Deaver | <i>History of Medicine, A Scandalously Short Introduction</i> by Jacalyn Duffin |
| <i>Wit</i> by Margaret Edson (x2)* | <i>Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science</i> by Atul Gawande |
| <i>Middlemarch</i> by George Eliot (x2) | <i>What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger</i> by Arthur Kleinman |
| <i>The Bacchae</i> by Euripides | <i>Remaking Life and Death: Towards an Anthropology of the Biosciences</i> by Margaret Lock |
| <i>The Wars</i> by Timothy Findley | <i>War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race</i> by Edwin Black |
| <i>The Cider House Rules</i> by John Irving | <i>Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined</i> |
| <i>The Shock Doctrine</i> by Naomi Klein | <i>A Country Doctor's Notebook</i> by Mikhail Boulgakov |
| <i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i> by Milan Kundera | <i>The God Gene, How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes</i> by Dean H. Hamer |
| <i>Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures</i> by Vincent Lam | <i>Doing Right (A Practical Guide to Ethics for Medical Trainees and</i> |
| <i>Catholic Bioethics</i> by William May | |
| <i>Le malade imaginaire</i> by Moliere | |
| <i>Oh, boy !</i> by Marie-Aude Murail | |
| <i>Team Medical Dragon</i> by Taro Nogizaka and Akya Nagai | |
| <i>1984</i> by George Orwell (x2) | |
| <i>The Greatest Benefit to Mankind</i> by Roy Porter | |
| <i>Ishmael</i> by Daniel Quinn | |
| <i>Hope for the children of Kantha Bopha</i> by Beat Richner | |

Table 1: Results of the survey: A list of all the suggestions put forward by students for a contemporary bedside reading list.

* Work suggested by two different students.

^ Work suggested by three different students.

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